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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION VIEWS ON
UPCOMING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Classified By: CDA Kevin Milas, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary: While some in the government seek to dampen expectations about the opposition's performance in upcoming parliamentary elections, the opposition itself is uniting and preparing to run an active campaign highlighting social justice issues and the presidential Nur Otan party's Achilles heel of corruption. Presidential Administration head Adilbek Dzhaksybekov assured the Ambassador that the authorities will ensure fair Mazhilis elections on August 18, but predicted that the opposition's decision to unite under the Social Democratic name will cost it votes. Opposition leaders Zharmakhan Tuyakbay and Bulat Abilov claim that the united opposition faces an uphill battle against "fake" opposition parties and a presidential party benefiting from massive private sector subsidies, administrative resources, and biased electoral commissions. End summary.

Government: Opposition Will Fail in Fair Elections

12. (C) The Kazakhstani government is doing everything it can to ensure that the August 18 elections for the Mazhilis (lower house of parliament) will be open to equal competition by all parties, Presidential Administration head Adilbek Dzhaksybekov told the Ambassador on June 28. Dzhaksybekov, whose awkward body language revealed his discomfort discussing the election issue, claimed that "everyone" was seeking administrative resources from the government but "not even (presidential party) Nur Otan" will receive assistance.

13. (C) Dzhaksybekov stated that the government recognized the long-term benefit of having the opposition represented in parliament. He said that he is nonetheless skeptical that the newly enlarged Social Democratic party, which has absorbed True Ak Zhol, will be able to cross the 7% threshold for inclusion. Dzhaksybekov characterized it as a mistake for the opposition to abandon the well-known True Ak Zhol "brand." All parties, even Nur Otan, will face difficulty getting out the vote during the hot vacation season in August, he said.

Opposition: Results Will Be Determined by Astana

14. (SBU) During a June 29 meeting with the Ambassador, opposition leaders Zharmakhan Tuyakbay and Bulat Abilov confirmed the decision to merge the Social Democratic and True Ak Zhol parties at a July 7 party congress. The new party's campaign platform will focus on themes that will resonate with the general public such as education, health care, natural resources, corruption, criminality, and drugs,

said Tuyakbay. (In a separate conversation with the DCM, opposition activist Petr Svoik said that two main campaign slogans would be "Hands Off Our Right-Drive Cars" and "the National Fund Should be the People's Fund," a reference to spending more of the country's oil wealth on pressing social needs.) Tuyakbay told the Ambassador that negotiations were underway to include Alga and the Communist Party. (Note: Subsequent press reports indicate that both groups decided not to join, and the Communists have called on their voters to boycott the Mazhilis elections. End note.)

15. (C) Abilov alleged that rival Alikhan Baymenov's Ak Zhol party was already receiving administrative resources from the government and being allowed to advertise widely. The government will try to portray Ak Zhol as a true opposition party and will manipulate the voting so that it comes in second after Nur Otan, he claimed. In contrast, Abilov said, the Social Democrats had thus far not been able to air a single television ad. While he expected the television channels to agree to air their ads during the formal campaign period, Abilov predicted problems distributing printed material around the country, which they would seek to avoid by printing as much as possible locally.

16. (SBU) Abilov also complained that the opposition had been included in only 1,000 of the 10,000 local electoral commissions around the country. The bulk of their representatives were in rural areas where they expected few votes. At the same time, several very small pro-presidential parties such as Rukhaniyat and the Patriots' Party were represented on almost all electoral commissions. (Details of the commission formation process to be reported septel.)

17. (C) Abilov predicted that the Social Democrats would

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receive 30% of the vote. If the campaign, voting, or tabulation were rigged, the party might pull out of the voting or refuse to take any seats it won, he added. Voters distinguish between President Nazarbayev the person, still respected as the creator of an independent, stable Kazakhstan, and Nur Otan, which is seen as the party of corrupt bureaucrats, Abilov said. Tuyakbay commented that Almaty mayor Imangali Tasmagambetov had become one of the richest people in the country thanks to billions of dollars worth of land sales during his tenure. Abilov named Nazarbayev confidante Bulat Utemuratov as another example of high-level corruption, "a billionaire who has never had a business." The opposition will use the scandal surrounding presidential son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev to show that Nazarbayev has failed to rein in his family, Tuyakbay said.

18. (C) Tuyakbay alleged that Nur Otan has received massive donations from the country's main businesses, including \$50 million each from KazMunayGas and Kaz Temir Zholiy (the national railroad); \$50 million from metals magnate Aleksandr Mashkevich; \$50 million from KazakhMys; and \$50 million total from the five main banks. "The Social Democrats have resources," he said, "but nothing like Nur Otan's \$300 million war chest." Tuyakbay also claimed that oblast akims (regional leaders) have been ordered to deliver 80% of the vote to Nur Otan; the akims have in turn set an 85% target for the local leaders underneath them in order to "outdo the next guy." He predicted that the final totals would be determined in Astana, and that Ak Zhol and the Social Democrats would each likely receive the minimum 7%.

19. (SBU) Alga leader Asylbek Kozhakhmetov told the DCM on July 2 that he believed the end result would depend on President Nazarbayev's will, but it was realistic to expect the united opposition forces to cross the 7% threshold and receive 10-15 seats in the Mazhilis.

Zhakiyanov Sees Shortcomings on Both Sides

10, (C) In a separate meeting with the Ambassador on June 29, former opposition leader Galymzhan Zhakiyanov said that the recent constitutional reforms and new elections were Nazarbayev's way of protecting himself. Nazarbayev is "not eager to leave office," Zhakiyanov said, but is making preparations to retain control by appointing more members of parliament, becoming party leader, and securing the loyalty of the Assembly of Peoples. Zhakiyanov predicted that when Nazarbayev left office he would become a senator for life and take a seat on the Constitutional Council. The recent changes were not an effort to win the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Zhakiyanov asserted. Nazarbayev is "sick of the issue," which is "now much more important for Vladimir Putin than for Nazarbayev himself," he explained.

¶11. (C) Zhakiyanov said that at one point Tuyakbay had the chance to be the "constructive opposition" included in the Mazhilis, but the decision to merge with True Ak Zhol would irritate Nazarbayev because of the group's tendency to make radical statements. The Social Democrats will therefore probably receive 6.5% of the vote, Zhakiyanov predicted; Ak Zhol and perhaps the splinter People's Communist Party would be included in the lower house. The authorities will say that the Social Democrats failed to cross the threshold due to the perceived "closure" of True Ak Zhol and the Communists' refusal to participate. He saw the decision not to preserve the True Ak Zhol name as a mistake.

Comment

¶12. (C) Given the Kazakhstani government's continued drive to chair the OSCE in 2009 (which, despite Zhakiyanov's assertions, has not flagged), we expect the authorities to do everything possible to give the appearance of a clean and fair election. Nevertheless, the opposition's predictions of abuse of administrative resources and vote manipulation are not baseless; whatever the exhortations from Astana, the fundamental conditions which contributed to flawed elections in the past -- primarily the fact that regional leaders are appointed by and loyal only to President Nazarbayev -- have not changed. The fact that the opposition maintains a relatively optimistic outlook in the face of such odds lends support to the rumor that negotiations with Astana have resulted in a mutual understanding regarding the election

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results.
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